

## Challenges for the trade union movement:

# *Affirmative action for women in the public sector:*

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### Introduction

The public sector is highly unionised – more than 485 000 public sector employees are organised into trade unions and staff associations. The rise of public sector unions has changed the composition of the South African labour movement. In the 1970s and 80s, organised labour was predominantly blue-collar, male and located in the private sector. The emergence of large public sector unions within COSATU and the recent affiliation of the SA Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), has introduced large numbers of professionals and women (nurses, teachers and academics) into the labour movement. This poses new challenges for the federation.

Important issues for the labour movement go beyond dispute procedures and wage bargaining to the development of plans for affirmative action for men and women. This is a complex problem, particularly where women are faced with sexism not only from their employers, but also from their fellow

trade unionists. Strong affirmative action plans are essential for transforming and building democracy in our society. Such plans must skill and empower black women in various fields, in particular those in rural villages, squatter camps and townships who are the worst victims of abject poverty, disease, unemployment, homelessness. Remember, according to Cole Kgositsile, over nine million African women live in rural areas and will need special attention when working out national development programmes.

Allow us to state at the outset, that we do not see the public service as the proper place to “create employment” for the unemployed, rather that the staff composition of the public service should reflect the relative population size of blacks, coloureds, whites, Indians and women.

This article raises debates around the following questions:

- What is affirmative action?
- Why affirmative action and equality for women?
- What are the possible strategies for affirmative action for women and what are the challenges facing the trade union movement?

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**Where are the black people and women in our public service?**

The following tables are useful, just to give us a handle on the racially skewed composition

of the public service. We are forced to make deductions about the employment of women, as government does not keep statistics on the gender composition of public employees.

Table 1: Distribution of public service staff in selected occupations in respect of population groups for the central government and the self-governing territories as at 30 April 1991

Occupational Family	White	Coloured	Indian	Black
Natural science professional staff	3 353	12	21	55
Architects, engineers and related staff	1 210	5	4	24
Economic staff	662	5	1	49
Medical staff	11 086	284	1 271	748
Air traffic control staff	65	0	0	0
Secretarial staff	7 601	499	240	1 186
Management echelon	1 423	7	8	25

Table 2: Workforce profile versus population distribution at central government level, 1991

Race	Number	Workforce profile at central government level (%)	Population distribution (%)
White	309 157	40,7	13,
Coloured	120 518	15,9	8,7
Indian	31 728	4,2	2,7
African	297 616	39,2	75,3
Total	759 019	100	100

These tables show that, although black people are employed in the public service, they are not employed in highly skilled jobs which pay high incomes. White males occupy 99% of management positions, leaving only 1% for Africans, Coloureds, Indians and

women. Secretarial posts are staffed largely by white women. In air traffic control, there is not a single post filled by a black person. Employment in the public service has been a key means for keeping blacks and women poor and powerless.

### What is affirmative action?

Affirmative action is what advocates of women's rights describe as the special measures taken to encourage female entry into jobs or areas that have traditionally been dominated by males. Some define affirmative action as "any action designed to overcome and compensate for the past and present discrimination" or inequalities which may be based on race, gender or class.

For decades, indeed centuries, the vast majority of women have been systematically denied entry into a considerable number of occupations and positions, where pay rates are high and where key decisions are taken.

Without doing any detailed research, let us consider the following questions:

Do women at your work place enjoy the same rights as their male counterparts?

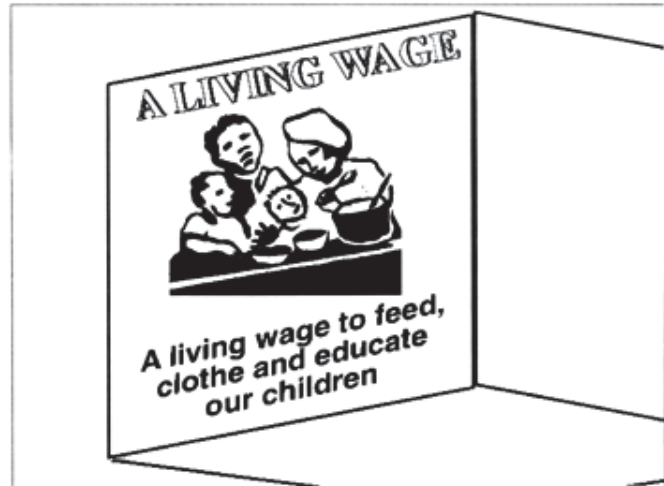
How many women are in management positions in the school system compared to their male counterparts?

How many women are in the key decision making positions in our progressive organisations at all levels, for example site/plant level, local, regional or national levels?

### Why affirmative action for women?

The statistically high level of participation of women in the labour market disguises the fact that they are employed largely in menial work and poorly paid jobs. This gives rise to very serious economic pressures, as in many instances, women who are employed may be the major or sole breadwinner for an extended family. Opportunities to enter more skilled, better paying jobs, will contribute to social development for black families and in black communities. As women are a large proportion of the society, their access to key civil service jobs is essential if the public service is to be responsive to the needs of women and successfully meet their needs.

Discrimination against women has also allowed employers to undermine the collective strength of workers. Equality of the sexes would help to build the unity of workers. Since our ability to fight for individual and collective rights depends on



our unity and solidarity, equality is critical to all our struggles.

However, gaining access to male-dominated sectors is not easy for women. Systematic discrimination in both social and training policies is widespread and so deeply ingrained that it is seldom conscious. For example, a man who likes the company of women and "their" lifestyle becomes the source of ridicule "Yindod 'e theni le engubafazini."

Women also often find the effort of working in a predominantly male environment too great, for example sexual harassment, difficulty in organising domestic labour and child care (traditionally regarded as women's duties). These are duties which have reinforced sex stereotypes and inequality by placing the major social responsibilities which accompany child birth and child care on the shoulders of women. Although male comrades' attitudes are changing, they seldom lead a fight for women's issues without being pushed hard by the women who are directly affected. This is yet a further reason why women should be elected into key positions in trade unions.

### Principles and strategies for affirmative action

The challenge facing the labour movement, to contribute to drawing up action plans which will see blacks and women in key posts in the public service in the next five to ten years, is enormous. Any strategy must acknowledge that the most disadvantaged are always those in the rural areas, on farms, in squatter camps

and urban townships. Men and women from these areas must have access to positions in local and provincial governments and administrations and in the national government and central administration.

South Africa has the advantage of being able to look at successes and failures around the world in formulating its own approach. Pioneer experiences show that the following factors play an important role in the success or failure of affirmative action plans:

- ❑ setting clear objectives and making a commitment to specific outcomes (appointment and training of women for key posts by 1995)
- ❑ appreciation of the nature of the problem (provision of child care, reasonable working hours, a good training package and encouragement to move into highly skilled jobs)
- ❑ the relevance of the solution to the problem (publishing an advert inviting women to apply may not be sufficiently attractive, whereas making child care a part of the remuneration package could be very attractive)
- ❑ the manner of implementation, evaluation and scope of the plan (are women put under excessive pressure to achieve and is the evaluation particularly demanding)
- ❑ ability and willingness to enforce the affirmative action plan (there should be bodies to which a female employee or a union acting on behalf of its members could lay a complaint against the employer and receive redress).

## Principles

### *Equality must be the guiding principle.*

The fundamental right to equality established in the Interim Constitution recognises that real equality is more than just equal opportunity to jobs and incomes. Equal opportunity could still deny women access to jobs, if, for example, large numbers of women fail the entrance examinations for appointment to key posts. Real equality means that measures must be taken to ensure that black people and women have as good a chance as anyone else of passing the test,

winning the job and earning the salary. At present, gender inequality in the public sector is a form of legalised injustice. Those with good education (paid for by apartheid) are appointed to the key posts (paid for by apartheid) and these public officials deliver good services to white communities. Real equality is therefore essential to providing equitable services to all sectors of the population.

### *We need a new definition of "merit".*

Experience in working in communities and implementing social development programmes, fluency in the various languages spoken in South Africa, the ability to facilitate meetings between government and non-government bodies, the ability to resolve disputes – these should all qualify as important elements of the merit principle. Presently, merit is a guise for racism and nepotism in appointments. Research by groups like the Australian Affirmative Action Agency suggests that people in decision-making positions tend to believe that those who closely resemble them are best suited to do the job well, while those most different from them will be least able to perform. The privileged Afrikaner men reproduce themselves in this way and also determine the culture and values of the public service. A management echelon which reflects the wide composition of society – women, coloureds, Indians, whites, Africans, different language groups – is more likely to effect a real change in the culture and composition of the entire civil service.

### *Affirmative action for black women.*

African women, the most "different" group, are clustered in menial and low paid jobs such as cleaning, tea making, the lower rungs of nursing and teaching, while Coloured and Indian women tend to be accommodated in the lower ranks of the clerical corps. Discussion on either race or gender affirmative action tends to omit specific reference to black women. Since black women do not belong exclusively to either category of race or gender, separate approaches to race and gender risk excluding them from the picture. This would severely

limit the success of any affirmative action programme. Advancing black men and white women, while ignoring black women, would leave the majority of women and their dependants in the same state of poverty as they are now.

***Many models for affirmative action.***

Affirmative action is not a mechanical phenomenon, where one does a simple head count of the numbers of blacks and women entering the service. This mistake was made in America 30 years ago when blacks and women were brought in and trained into white male dominated institutions and occupations without questioning the institutional culture. When they "failed" to assimilate, the blame would be attributed to them and to the wrong selection criteria, and a re-selection would take place. This meant that due to a high rate of turnover, blacks and women did not replace white males in particular occupations and at the decision-making level.

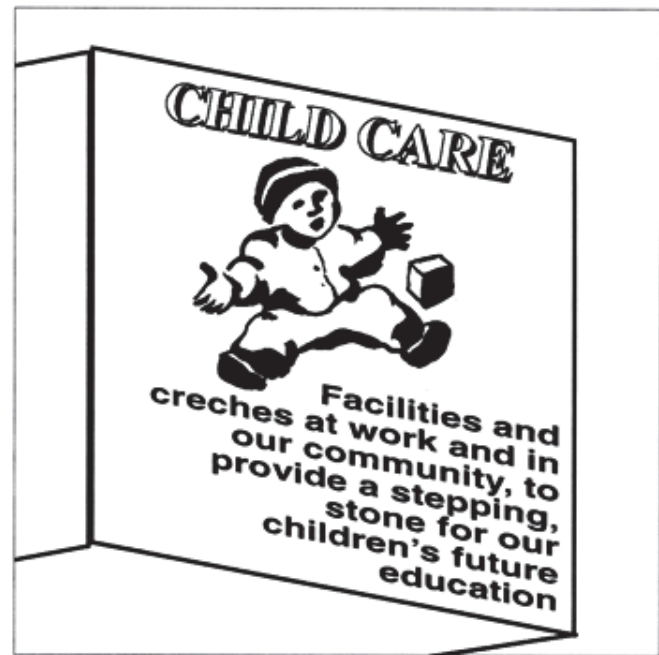
***Institutions must be transformed.***

Womens' ability to emulate men is restricted and black women are least likely to behave like white men. Affirmative measures must be based on the real life patterns of women. Such measures must attempt to free women from concerns of parenting, sexual harassment, violence and general abuse. Further intervention should prioritise recruitment, training, career pathing including placement in positions that are pivotal for advancement. Existing management must also be trained on the value of diversity in the workplace and in the provision of services.

***Balancing equity and efficiency.***

The present arrangement is neither fair nor efficient. For women, this means denial of income opportunities, while for society it means a narrow human resource pool, a narrow cultural perspective and poor service from a "protected elite" who do not have to compete fairly for jobs. Concerns for both equity and efficiency require an intensive training programme to be made available to women, if South Africa is to build a representative public sector.

***Cautious but decisive state intervention.***



The ANC's Reconstruction and Development Programme lays the basis of an approach. Further development of the plan could provide a legal framework for real or substantive equality. Specific guidelines on employment and appointment to political positions in local government could be legislated (as in Namibia). This could combine compulsory and optional elements with penalties for employers/managers who fail to implement the former and incentives such as tax breaks for employers/managers who introduce the options. Another way of getting public sector managers to implement affirmative action, is to make this a requirement for their own promotion to higher ranks within the service.

**Strategy**

There are three possible strategies for affirmative action:

***1. Voluntary action by the employer***

This refers to a situation where employers including government are encouraged to voluntarily introduce affirmative action. Whilst some employers have taken steps on such programmes, they have produced only token results.

***2. Government-enforced action***

Government can introduce affirmative action through human rights legislation and through specific affirmative action laws. The future democratic government would need to ensure

that there are clear policies and statements, which are translated into plans and training programmes addressing the obstacles women face with access to various fields, including education. Affirmative action through education should encourage women to study subjects which they have traditionally been discouraged from – mathematics and the natural sciences – as well as presenting topics which will empower them in the work environment – dealing with sexual harassment, women and work, etc.

One of the difficulties of this approach is that it is seldom that governments act to defend the interests of the most exploited workers against the hiring policies of large corporations. In fact, many governments are dictated to by big capital in the arena of economic policy.

### **3. Union-won action**

Many unions have adopted policy statements in support of equal opportunity and various affirmative action programmes. But now action is required:

- ❑ Members must be educated and organised around affirmative action and affirmative action for women in particular.
- ❑ Unions must make affirmative action a priority for policy-making in the workplace. Affirmative action should not be the subject of a narrow approach to “negotiating affirmative action”. This can have serious negative results, where many unions are engaged with one employer and where the majority of those unions do not represent black workers or women. In fact, the conservative white staff associations can be a major obstacle to affirmative action plans.
- ❑ Further problems are encountered where the employer shifts responsibility for affirmative action to the “negotiations” and claims that “the unions signed the agreement”, even where it is a poor agreement. Whatever the nature of consultation on this issue, employers must be held responsible for implementation. The consultation process should also recognise the greater weight of arguments presented by unions representing black

workers and women, while acknowledging fairness to white employees.

Unions must demand equal pay for work of equal value. The demand for equal pay (parity) has already had a huge impact within and outside the labour movement. The demand for parity has been one of the key mobilising strategies of SADTU.

## **Conclusion**

Guidelines for the public sector:

1. Set clear objectives and have clear written policy on priority areas, target groups and relationships between these groups
  2. Consultation with unions, staff associations and employees
  3. Establish an Affirmative Action Commission with broad powers to implement and monitor the programme and to keep a database of personnel and posts throughout the public sector
  4. Delegation of responsibility to senior officers in state departments and other state institutions
  5. Provision for parental rights and child care facilities
  6. Appropriate wage policies, reduction of the gaps between grades
  7. A Code of Conduct to guard against sexual harassment, racism and workplace violence, etc.
  8. An impartial appeals body to deal with grievances and complaints
  9. Public announcement of the policy
  10. Submission of regular reports to the Affirmative Action Agency and to Parliament
- For those who are not sensitive to the issue of gender inequalities, they need to understand that it is as sensitive as the race inequalities in our country. ☆

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